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First Blood Test to Diagnose Alzheimer's Disease Goes on Sale, Reports Say
by [Mary F.](#)

Alzheimer's disease destroys memory and other vital mental functions. Memory loss and confusion are the main symptoms, and while no cure exists for the disease, medication and other management strategies may improve symptoms. Alzheimer's disease also accounts for more than half of all dementia cases.

C2N Diagnostics' blood test to identify Alzheimer's disease is now for sale, according to a [Monday report by the Associated Press](#). The company, however, has yet to announce on its website that its test is now for sale. Its [latest news release](#), which dates to November 17, states that its blood test has been rolled out for clinical use.

The test has not yet been approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and is being sold under general rules for commercial labs, according to the AP. In addition, the company has yet to publish any data on the test's accuracy.

The test identifies the presence of amyloid plaque in the brain. To be diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, patients must experience memory loss and have a buildup of a protein called beta-amyloid in their brains. The test is reportedly meant to be administered to people 60 and older who have cognitive issues and are being evaluated for Alzheimer's disease. In addition to measuring two types of amyloid particles, the blood test identifies various forms of a protein that shows whether someone has a gene that raises their risk for Alzheimer's.

These various factors are aggregated in a formula that also takes into account age to score each patient's likelihood of having amyloid buildup in the brain, according to the AP.

In October, the [company announced its blood test](#), calling it a "breakthrough."

"This is an exciting and much-needed development," George Vradenburg, chairman and co-founder of the nonprofit UsAgainstAlzheimer's, said at the time.

"The advance of blood-based tests for use by physicians in the Alzheimer's diagnostic process is occurring at a much more rapid pace than many in the field have appreciated. Accessible, affordable, and earlier testing by physicians is essential to understand the underlying cause of any cognitive impairment and to more effectively make or rule out a clinical Alzheimer's diagnosis."

However, other experts have said they will not endorse the test without FDA approval.

"It's not quite clear how accurate or generalizable the results are," Heather Snyder of the Alzheimer's Association told the AP.

According to C2N Diagnostics co-founder and CEO Dr. Joel Braunstein, the [published research](#) on the test suggests that it can detect beta-amyloid buildup. He also revealed to the AP that the company plans to seek FDA approval.

"Should we be holding that technology back when it could have a big impact on patient care?" he said to the AP, defending the decision to sell the test before FDA approval.

Currently, the gold standard to measure beta-amyloid levels in the brain is through a costly positron emission tomography (PET) scan that is not typically covered by insurance, the outlet noted.

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First Air Shipment of Pfizer's COVID-19 Vaccine Reportedly Arrives in US Prior to FDA Approval by [Mary F.](#)

American multinational pharmaceutical company Pfizer has completed its phase 3 trial of its COVID-19 vaccine candidate and has found its vaccine to be 95% effective against the respiratory illness. The company is currently seeking emergency use approval from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

According to a [report by CNBC](#), citing people familiar with the matter, United Airlines carried Pfizer's vaccine from Belgium's Brussels to Chicago, Illinois, on Friday, as pharmaceutical companies are beginning to prepare for possible wide distribution of their vaccines. It's unclear how many doses of Pfizer's vaccine, developed with German partner BioNTech, were on the flight.

A source familiar with the news also told NBC News that the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) allowed United to [carry 15,000 pounds of dry ice per flight](#), five times more than the amount usually allowed, to keep the doses cold, [Sputnik previously reported](#).

Pfizer's vaccine must be stored at a temperature of minus 94 degrees Fahrenheit or lower, [according to Reuters](#), because the vaccine uses synthetic messenger RNA (mRNA) to prompt the body's immune system to respond against COVID-19. Last week, [the Wall Street Journal reported](#) that the drug company designed suitcase-sized boxes packed with dry ice to keep its vaccine doses at the required temperature.

Although United didn't confirm details of the flight, the airline did note in a recent statement that it is working to support "a vaccine distribution effort on a global scale."

"United Cargo established a COVID Readiness Task Team earlier this summer to help ensure we have the right people, products, services, and partnerships in place to support a vaccine distribution effort on a global scale. We have made a commitment to our pharmaceutical and medical customers that we are ready to safely and effectively support their vaccine transportation needs. The safety and security of these commodities is our priority and we are proud to be a trusted partner in these efforts," the airline said in a [statement obtained by ABC7](#). The FAA in a separate statement on Friday also confirmed it was "supporting the first mass air shipment of a vaccine" and said it was working with airlines to ensure the safe transportation of such vaccines, the Wall Street Journal reported.

Although Pfizer has yet not commented on the news, company spokesperson Kim Bencker previously said that Pfizer won't release the vaccine "until the FDA issues an authorization or approval," [CNBC reported](#).

Pfizer submitted its application for emergency clearance on November 20, and the FDA is expected to discuss the clearance during the next Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee meeting on December 10.

A relatively new type of treatment, mRNA vaccines like Pfizer's work by providing instructions to healthy cells to generate antibodies for a certain virus or bacterium. Conventional vaccines, on the other hand, introduce a weakened or dead virus or bacterium into the body. This induces an immune system response, allowing the body to recognize and fight the pathogen in the future. In addition to Pfizer's vaccine, phase 3 clinical trials in the US are in progress or being planned for COVID-19 vaccines developed by AstraZeneca, Janssen, Moderna and Novavax, [according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#). AstraZeneca's vaccine, developed in conjunction with the University of Oxford, has been found to be, on [average, 70% effective](#).

Russia in early August became the first country to approve a COVID-19 vaccine. The drug, named Sputnik V, was developed by Russia's Gamaleya Research Institute. Clinical trial data [has shown that](#) Sputnik V has a 91.4% efficacy 28 days after the first dose and a 95% efficacy 42 days after the initial dose. The data was obtained from a phase 3 double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled study of the vaccine involving 40,000 volunteers.

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China Turns on Hualong One, First Domestically Designed Nuclear Reactor
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The new development of advanced nuclear reactors is a major step in reducing China's dependence on Western nations in high-tech sectors in Beijing's "Made in China 2025" plan. On Friday, the No. 5 unit at the Fuqing Nuclear Power Plant in China's Fujian Province was connected to the electrical grid and [produced electricity for the first time, CGTN reported](#). The reactor was of the new Hualong One design - China's first domestically developed nuclear reactor.

"This marks China breaking the monopoly of foreign nuclear power technology and officially entering the technology's first batch of advanced countries," the China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) said in a statement.

According to CGTN, the third-generation reactor design is among the world's safest and most advanced nuclear power generators. The reactor has 177 cores, which will be replaced every 18 months for the next 60 years.

[According to the South China Morning Post](#), Hualong One will generate some 10 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity per year and trim carbon emissions by 8.16 million tons. With Beijing aiming to make the country carbon-neutral by 2060, reactors of this type could go a long way toward reaching that goal.

In September, [Chinese President Xi Jinping told the United Nations](#) General Assembly that China would be further tightening its carbon emissions goals as part of its commitment to combating climate change. In particular, his commitment to "peaking" China's emissions before

2030 sets it ahead of the goals set by the 2015 Paris Climate Accord. China is the world's largest consumer of coal and is responsible for one-quarter of all human greenhouse emissions. China has 49 nuclear reactors generating a combined electrical output of roughly 47,500 megawatts, [according to World Nuclear Association data](#). Seven more reactors of the Hualong One design are also under construction, and another four have been approved, [according to Asia Nikkei](#). Once they come online, China will surpass France as the world's second-largest nuclear power producer. The US is the world's top nuclear power producer. One of those [Hualong One reactors is in Karachi, Pakistan](#), and CNNC is awaiting export approval to the UK and Argentina as well. The design is intended to compete with US-based Westinghouse's AP1000 reactor. [Ironically, all four AP1000s currently in operation](#) are also in China.

That's a sharp reversal of policy for most of the last decade. In the aftermath of the March 2011 Fukushima Daiichi disaster in eastern Japan, where an earthquake and tsunami disabled the nuclear power station's safety systems and caused a meltdown, [Beijing placed a moratorium on new plants](#) it only lifted last year. However, construction of the first Hualong One reactor began in 2015.

That same year, Xi unveiled a "Made in China 2025" program that aimed to [put the socialist nation at the forefront of 10 emerging technologies](#), including robotics, aerospace, clean fuel automobiles and even farming equipment. This would enable Chinese industries to compete with the US and Germany abroad as well as filling China's domestic needs.

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Chinese, American Tech Giants Race to Back Indonesia's Burgeoning 'Unicorn' Startups
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Indonesia's growing internet market has become an unlikely arena for Chinese and American competition, with tech giants from both countries sinking millions of dollars into local startups as the population's internet access grows rapidly.

Chinese and American tech firms are rushing to take advantage of Indonesia's fast-growing internet market, sinking millions into local startup firms dubbed "unicorns" that already sport a value of at least \$1 billion. Several big deals have been penned in just the last month, despite a sharp economic contraction due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

'Positive Ripple Effect'

"Indonesia, specifically, is the fourth-largest internet population in the world, has a high number of exciting tech start-ups and is the largest market by population," Pinn Lawjindakul, vice president at Lightspeed Venture Partners in Singapore, [told the South China Morning Post \(SCMP\) on Monday](#).

"These investments in Indonesia signal the importance of the country and the wider region in the eyes of these global tech giants. This vote of confidence will have a positive ripple effect. More international companies will be driven to follow suit and invest here, which will encourage

more innovation and the creation of more start-ups," she said. "It is a very exciting time for founders and investors in Indonesia and the Southeast Asia region as a whole."

[According to data from the World Bank](#), the percentage of Indonesia's 267.7-million-strong population with internet access has skyrocketed. In 2019, 47.7% of Indonesia's population had internet access; the year prior, it was just 39.9%, and 32.3% the year before that.

According to SCMP, US tech companies like Uber are following in the footsteps of Chinese tech firms in choosing to enter new markets by investing in local existing companies, rather than trying to edge their way in using their own products. [In 2018, Uber sold all its Southeast Asian assets to Grab](#), a Singapore-based competitor that dominates the local market. In exchange, Uber got a 27.5% stake in the company.

An Avalanche of Investment

In just the last month, several major deals have been announced.

On November 3, [Microsoft announced a "strategic partnership"](#) with Indonesian e-commerce platform Bukalapak to "leverage Microsoft's expertise in building a resilient cloud infrastructure to support Bukalapak services for more than 12 million micro, small and medium enterprises, and 100 million customers," according to a news release.

Google has also teamed up with Temasek, Singapore's sovereign wealth fund, to invest in Bukalapak's chief rival, Tokopedia. [According to Asia Nikkei, the investments bump](#) Google's holdings in Temasek to a 1.6% stake, or \$1.1 million, and Temasek's holding to a 3.3% stake, valued at \$2.37 million.

Japan's Softbank Group is the largest holder in Tokopedia, with a 33.9% stake in the company, and China's Alibaba Group, the world's largest e-commerce retailer, holds a 28.3% stake.

The same day as the Google-Temasek-Tokopedia deal was made public, Amazon said it would be building a \$2.8 billion data center to support its cloud computing service in West Java.

Provincial Governor Ridwan Kamil boasted the province would soon "have a data center backbone that is capable of serving digital companies across Southeast Asia," [according to the Jakarta Globe](#).

Last month, Chinese cellphone maker and internet provider Huawei signed a memorandum of understanding with Indonesia's Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology (BPPT) to develop the country's artificial intelligence, cloud computing and 5G internet technology fields.

"The BPPT's collaboration with Huawei is a symbol of open innovation as well as part of a commitment to accelerate the creation of a strong, innovation-based digital ecosystem in Indonesia. We hope that this collaboration can become a progenitor to Indonesia's efforts to become more competitive in the context of Industrial Revolution 4.0," Indonesian Research and Technology Minister [Bambang Brodjonegoro told the Jakarta Post](#).

Earlier in the year, PayPal and Facebook-owned messaging app WhatsApp invested an undisclosed amount in Jakarta-based ride-hailing and food delivery app Gojek. [According to Reuters, which cited regulatory filings](#), Facebook acquired a 2.4% stake and PayPal a 0.6% stake in Go-Pay, Gojek's e-wallet service, as part of the deal. Gojek has also collected investments from Google as well as Chinese firms Tencent and JD.com. [According to TechCrunch, the deals collectively amount](#) to \$1.2 billion.

The slew of investments is even more notable, given Indonesia's economic troubles this year. In the third quarter of 2020, the country's gross domestic product shrank by 3.49%, [according to](#)

[government statistics](#), and the International Monetary Fund [revised its expectations downward in October](#), saying Indonesia's GDP could shrink by a total of 1.5% for the entire year instead of the modest 0.3% decline predicted in June.

However, Indonesia isn't the only place courting widespread tech investment thanks to increasing internet access: "countries such as Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines are also natural candidates for high investment interest in the next few years," Lawjindakul said.

Investment Storm Comes Amid Free Trade Deal

Many of these countries - but notably not the United States - [recently signed on to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership](#) (RCEP) free trade bloc and are participants in China's Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure project. However, many have also come under pressure from Washington, which seeks to build a regional network to turn them against Beijing's influence, [accusing China of seeking to undermine the "rules-based international order"](#) set up by the US after World War II.

Washington has led the charge against Chinese tech companies in recent years, banning the sale or use in the US of everything from electronic devices and internet service provided by Huawei, ZTE and Xiaomi to ByteDance's popular video messaging app TikTok, [accusing them of being vulnerable to exploitation](#) by the Communist Party of China - accusations Beijing has denied.

"ByteDance is putting a huge amount of money into Southeast Asia, via Singapore, because of US-China tension and India-China tension, so you can clearly see from this that the Chinese companies are putting more money and effort in the region," Vinnie Lauria, founding partner at Singapore-based Golden Gate Ventures, told SCMP.

Last week, New Delhi banned another 43 Chinese apps, including delivery service Lalamove and Alibaba's AliExpress, bringing the total of banned Chinese apps to [220 since June, according to Financial Times](#).

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Little Bee, Big Problems: Dozens of Australian Aircraft Safety Mishaps Traced to Invasive Wasps

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

North America isn't the only continent dealing with a troublesome invasive species of wasp: a new study has revealed just how much of a problem the keyhole wasp, a species native to Central America, is causing for Australia's airline industry.

According to a group of scientists at New South Wales-based environmental consultancy Eco Logical Australia, dozens of safety problems on aircraft at Brisbane Airport can be traced to a single issue: mud nests built by the keyhole wasp, a species native to Central America and the Caribbean.

Their study, [published in the open-access journal PLOS One on Monday](#), found that the wasps had blocked 93 pitot probes - instruments on aircraft that measure airspeed - with their muddy

nests over a 39-month period. The wasps notoriously love to build their homes in narrow crevices, such as the small opening at the front of a plane's pitot probe.

The researchers further noted that Brisbane Airport reported 26 wasp-related issues between November 2013 and April 2019. They noted they were contracted by the airport to produce the safety study.

"It's not a Mayday emergency but it's the next level down, and it closes the runways," biologist and [study co-author Alan House told the New York Post](#).

For the study, the researchers 3D-printed a series of replica pitot probes and placed them at four locations around the airport. Every single incident of nesting inside the probes was by keyhole wasps, which built most often during the summer months, when temperatures reached between 24 and 31 degrees Celsius.

Through such nest-building, the researchers said, the wasp "poses a significant risk to aviation safety," and they advised further work "to determine the prospects for its control or, preferably, eradication."

"We hope this research will bring attention to a little known but serious issue for air travel in tropical and sub-tropical regions. Having found its way across the Pacific Ocean, there is no reason to doubt that it could spread to other parts of Australia. The consequences of not managing this clever but dangerous pest could be substantial," they added.

Across the Pacific in North America, another type of wasp is stirring up trouble far from its native land as well. On the northwest coast near the US-Canada border, Asian giant hornets have been spotted in recent years. The huge insects, which are the world's largest hornet species, [are capable of massacring whole honeybee hives](#) in a matter of hours, and their powerful stings can kill a human when delivered in sufficient number or if they cause an allergic reaction, giving the insect the gruesome nickname "murder hornet."

Accordingly, an all-out effort has been launched to locate and eradicate any and all nests the creatures establish in Washington State and British Columbia. Earlier this month, one nest reported to have 200 queens in it was found and destroyed before the queens could scatter and found new hives.

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US Navy Decides to Scrap Amphibious Assault Ship Bonhomme Richard After Catastrophic Fire by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The total loss of the Pacific-based amphibious assault ship USS Bonhomme Richard could put a serious dent in Washington's plans to base stealthy F-35 aircraft on its carriers in the Indo-Pacific region, experts have warned.

After a fire gutted the ship in July while it was harbored off of San Diego, California, the US Navy has decided not to try and refurbish the USS Bonhomme Richard. [Rear Adm. Eric Ver Hage, commander](#) of the Navy Regional Maintenance Center, [told reporters Monday that making the ship seaworthy again](#) would have been too costly.

Ver Hage said that rebuilding the amphibious assault ship back as she was before the July fire would have cost between \$2.5 and \$3.2 billion and taken between five and seven years. By comparison, the contract the Navy handed to Huntington Ingalls Shipbuilding in 2017 to construct the next amphibious assault ship, [the America-class vessel USS Bougainville, was for just \\$3 billion](#).

Another option the Navy considered, which was turning the 41,000-ton Bonhomme Richard into a hospital ship, would have cost \$1 billion but taken the same amount of time, Ver Hage said. Instead, the ship will be decommissioned, a process that will take just one year and cost \$30 million.

"We did not come to this decision lightly," Secretary of the Navy [Kenneth Braithwaite told the Times of San Diego](#). "Following an extensive material assessment in which various courses of action were considered and evaluated, we came to the conclusion that it is not fiscally responsible to restore her."

"Although it saddens me that it is not cost effective to bring her back, I know this ship's legacy will continue to live on through the brave men and women who fought so hard to save her," he added.

Beginning on July 12, [a fire believed to have begun in a storage area on the Bonhomme Richard](#) raged for four days as the ship lay anchored off of San Diego. The fire injured at least 63 people and caused extensive damage to the warship, buckling its aluminum superstructure and leaving it listing to the starboard side. The following month, [an unnamed senior defense official told the Associated Press](#) an arson investigation was underway.

The fifth Wasp-class ship, the USS Bonhomme Richard was commissioned in 1998. It is a type of hybrid warship: part aircraft carrier and part amphibious landing dock, it can dispatch both helicopters and vertical-takeoff aircraft as well as squads of Marines and their equipment for beachhead assaults. At the time of the fire, the Bonhomme Richard was finishing up two years of updates that would enable it to carry the advanced F-35B Joint Strike Fighter. Those upgrades cost the Navy \$250 million.

Bryan Clark, a retired US submarine officer and senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, [told Defense News at the time of the fire](#) that the disaster would be "a big problem" for Washington's plans to continuously deploy carriers with the F-35 in the Indo-Pacific region.

"Only half of [our 10 amphibious assault ships] are able to carry F-35B and the Marines are looking to reduce their land-based squadrons. So the loss of Bonhomme Richard will impact the Navy's ability to provide Combatant Commanders sea-based F-35s not subject to host-nation approval," he said.

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Money Matters: Advisers of Donald Trump Jr. Launch GOP Super PAC Ahead of Georgia Runoff Elections
by [Evan Craighead](#)

As US President Donald Trump prepares to campaign for GOP Senate candidates in Georgia, advisers to his eldest son, Donald Trump Jr., have rolled out a super PAC to get pro-Trump Republicans out the polls and maintain a party majority in the Senate.

Republican strategist Andy Surabian, who serves as an adviser to Trump Jr., [announced to Politico on Monday](#) that he and his fellow consultants are rolling out a Georgia-based super PAC to squelch US election apathy ahead of the January 5 runoff Senate races.

"There is a critical role that must be played in both Georgia Senate runoffs: turning out the Trump vote. We know from past midterms and special elections that the Trump voter is not guaranteed to every Republican candidate, which is why it's vital to directly engage these voters and not take them for granted," Surabian stated. "To that end, we are launching an aggressive campaign in support of the two Republican candidates, focused on energizing and turning out Trump supporters, using television, radio and digital ads featuring Donald Trump Jr."

The state's runoff elections came about after sitting Sens. David Perdue (R-GA) and Kelly Loeffler (R-GA) both failed to reach the necessary 50% threshold of votes to win their November 3 contests. Loeffler and Perdue are facing Democrats Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, respectively.

Senior Republican leadership has recently expressed concern over the US president's persistent allegations of voter fraud in Georgia, Politico reported. The GOP politicians fear Trump's rhetoric, [and certified state loss to Democratic challenger Joe Biden](#), could result in his base skipping out on the January 5 runoff.

Meanwhile, the US president recently revealed he would be making a trip down south on Saturday to hold a rally in support of Loeffler and Perdue.

"[W]e must get out and help [Perdue] and [Loeffler], two GREAT people," he tweeted Friday. "Otherwise we are playing right into the hands of some very sick people."

The White House later clarified the event is slated to take place on December 5, rather than November 28.

Loeffler's husband, Jeffrey Craig Sprecher - the founder, chairman and CEO of the Intercontinental Exchange and chairman of the New York Stock Exchange - notably contributed \$1 million to pro-Trump super PAC America First Action in April, [according to Federal Election Commission filing](#).

[The Daily Beast noted](#) this was the stock exchange executive's largest financial contribution to a federal election campaign. It also came weeks after the couple was publicly criticized in the press for alleged misconduct.

[Sputnik reported in March](#) that Loeffler and Sprecher, who wed 2004, were facing accusations of insider trading after they posted the first of several joint-stock sales on January 24 - the same day members on the Senate Health Committee and Senate Foreign Relations Committee were briefed by Trump administration health officials on the seriousness of the impending COVID-19 pandemic.

The couple [reportedly carried out a collective 29 stock transactions](#) through mid-February. The sales amounted to seven figures, and only two of the joint transactions were purchases. Loeffler and Sprecher "have made clear that those transactions were executed by their financial advisors without Mr. Sprecher's or Senator Loeffler's input or direction," argued the Intercontinental Exchange in a [March news release](#).

The Fortune 500 company went on to claim said transactions were executed via a Rule 10b5-1 trading plan and are "in compliance with Intercontinental Exchange, Inc. policies and procedures."

"Per ICE [Intercontinental Exchange] policy, all trading plans require a 30-day cooling off period from the time the trading plan is adopted to the date of the first transaction."

Citing a GOP strategist "familiar with the plans," [CNBC noted](#) Republicans and Democrats will each burn through around \$100 million over the next few weeks. Democratic victories in both races would split the Senate 50-50 between the two parties.

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Topshop Parent Company Arcadia Enters Administration, Putting 13,000 Jobs at Risk
by [Evan Craighead](#)

The status announcement for Arcadia comes just a few months after the UK fashion group's owner, Sir Philip Green, revealed budget cuts that would result in the removal of at least 500 of its 2,500 management jobs worldwide.

The UK-based audit and assurance service provider, Deloitte, issued a Monday evening memo detailing that it had been appointed to serve as bankruptcy administrator to Arcadia, the retail consortium that oversees Topshop, Topman, Dorothy Perkins, Wallis, Miss Selfridge, Evans, Burton and Outfit.

"Matt Smith and Dan Butters, together with other restructuring partners at Deloitte, have today been appointed as joint administrators to the group companies as part of a trading administration," Deloitte's statement read, [reported by the Financial News](#).

Smith explained that there were no immediate redundancies, as Deloitte wished for Arcadia to continue trading, performing online transactions and supplying concession partners. The company presently leases 444 UK-based sites and 22 locations abroad.

"We will be rapidly seeking expressions of interest and expect to identify one or more buyers to ensure the future success of the businesses," a joint administrator said.

"This is an incredibly sad day for all of our colleagues as well as our suppliers and our many other stakeholders," noted Arcadia CEO Ian Grabiner. "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic including the forced closure of our stores for prolonged periods has severely impacted on trading across all of our brands."

Green announced in July that the retail consortium would terminate at least 500 of its 2,500 management positions.

Despite attempts to maintain its profits, Arcadia ultimately encountered "the most difficult trading conditions we have ever experienced," according to the chief executive.

Reacting to developments, UK business secretary Alok Sharma described the bankruptcy filing as "incredibly sad news", stating that "The Govt stands ready to support those affected during this difficult period".

"It is incredibly sad news that Arcadia has entered into administration this evening [...] I know this will be a worrying time for employees and their families, especially in the run up to Christmas", he tweeted.

[Sputnik reported earlier on Monday](#) that Arcadia was on the "brink of administration" while Green had received a number of relief offers, including a £50 million emergency loan brought to the table by retail tycoon Mike Ashley.

Amid company chaos and prior to the November 30 announcement, Green was spotted vacationing in Monaco, where his £100 million superyacht, the Lionheart, is currently berthed. Paul Myners, an ex-chairman of Arcadia rival Marks and Spencer, appeared to argue to the BBC that Green's lackadaisical approach transferred to the boardroom.

"Covid has obviously been a significant factor but the truth is this group of brands has been hemorrhaging now for 15 years. It's become an insignificance," Myners asserted. "Sir Philip never really accepted the opportunity or challenge of online trading. He made no investment in that area at all."

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European Union Pushes Member States to Develop Counter-Drone Weaponry
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Recent conflicts in the Middle East and Caucasus have proven just how potent a threat unmanned aerial vehicles can be on the battlefield, prompting European nations and the United States to rush for technology to defend against them.

The European Defense Agency's recent report on its member states' military forces has found a major deficiency in counter-drone weapons.

The agency's "[Coordinated Annual Review on Defense](#)," which it passed to European Union members' defense ministries last week, warns that "European capability approaches towards A2/AD [Anti Access/Area Denial] are clearly at a crossroads, whereby the capability is either developed in a collaborative manner or the capability will not be developed for European forces."

Accordingly, the report "recommends developing a European capability to counter unmanned aerial systems (UAS) to improve force protection, as well as contributing to establish a European standard for Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD)."

While ongoing wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Somalia have proven just how effective drones can be, the EU's report also came just days after a ceasefire was reached by Azerbaijan and Armenia at the end of [a seven-week conflict over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region](#), in which drones played an important role.

The United States has made a similar push, sparked by the failure of its Patriot missile systems to intercept a slew of kamikaze drones that attacked two Saudi oil facilities in September 2019. The Pentagon has aimed to [develop as many as five counter-drone systems in 2020](#), including [directed energy weapons](#), jammers that interfere with a drone's communication with a ground controller, and short-range guns and missiles that can bring a drone down quickly. The US

military has [adopted a kamikaze drone of its own](#) with the intent of using the machine to intercept other kamikaze drones.

Just last week, [US soldiers stationed in Germany traveled to the White Sands Missile Range](#) in New Mexico to test the US Army's Interim Maneuver Short-Range Air Defense (IM-SHORAD) system, based on its Stryker wheeled armored vehicle. The Pentagon plans to field 144 of the systems by 2023, with the first going to US forces in Germany.

In all, the EDA report recommended six course changes for EU member states on defense, including developing a joint main battle tank and coastal patrol ship, starting a unified European space defense program and participation by more countries in joint exercises.

The push comes amid pressure from the Trump administration for members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) [to increase their defense budgets to at least 2%](#) of their gross domestic product - a goal only one-third of its members, many of whom are also in the EU, have reached.

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Nearly 30 NGOs Urge US to Ditch Massive Arms Sale to UAE

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - An international coalition of arms control organizations and human rights groups warned the US government that selling the United Arab Emirates (UAE) \$23 billion in weapons will exacerbate the conflicts in Yemen and Libya. On Monday, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a closed-door meeting with top State Department and Pentagon officials over the Trump administration approving the sale of several advanced defense capabilities to the UAE, including up to 50 F-35 fifth generation fighter jets and up to 18 MQ-9B Unmanned Aerial Systems.

"We the undersigned non-governmental organizations write in opposition to the United States government's plans to sell more than \$23 billion in advanced weapons systems and munitions to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The planned arms sales to the UAE, a party to the conflicts in Yemen and Libya, would fuel continued civilian harm and further exacerbate these humanitarian crises," the NGOs said in a letter.

The groups called on the Trump administration and President-elect Joe Biden to halt these sales as well as US support for the war in Yemen. In addition, they urged Congress not to approve any future arms sales or other military support to parties to the conflicts in Yemen and Libya.

The letter was signed by 29 groups including the Arms Control Association, Human Rights First, and the Center for International Policy, which tracks arms sales. The initiative was headed by the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), an advocacy group with offices in Washington and Tunisia.

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UPDATE - California Unable to Handle COVID-19 Surge, Governor Considers Stay-Home Order

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The state of California is looking at an unprecedented surge in COVID-19 cases over the next few weeks and its hospital system currently will not be able to sustain the projected strain, Governor Gavin Newsom and his top pandemic adviser said in a press conference.

"This is the tipping point," Newsom said on Monday. "California has worked hard to prepare for a surge - but we can't sustain the record high cases we're seeing. Current projections show California will run out of current ICU [intensive care unit] beds before Christmas Eve."

The governor also said he is considering taking drastic steps including reimposing a stay-home order like the one put in place earlier this month.

California Health and Human Services (CHHS) Secretary Dr. Mark Ghaly told the press conference that the rate of positive testing for COVID-19 had now soared to 34 cases per 100,000 in the state.

COVID-19 death rates in California were now running at 59 per day over the past seven days and the death rate had started to rise again, the trend line that was most feared, Newsom added.

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Trump's Special Adviser on COVID-19 Resigns - Report

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Scott Adams resigned from his position of special adviser on the coronavirus pandemic to US President Donald Trump, Fox News reported.

The broadcaster said it obtained Atlas's resignation letter which praises Trump's efforts and wishes "all the best" to the incoming administration under projected President-elect Joe Biden.

"I am writing to resign from my position as Special Advisor to the President of the United States," Fox News quoted the letter, which was dated December 1.

Atlas joined the administration in August, and was serving a 130-day detail as a Special Government Employee. His role is set to expire this week, Fox News reported.

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California Health System Unable to Sustain COVID-19 Surge - Governor

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The state of California is looking at an unprecedented surge in COVID-19 cases over the next few weeks and its hospital system currently will not be able to sustain the projected strain, Governor Gavin Newsom and his top pandemic adviser said in a press conference.

"This is the tipping point," Newsom said on Monday. "California has worked hard to prepare for a surge - but we can't sustain the record high cases we're seeing. Current projections show California will run out of current ICU [intensive care unit] beds before Christmas Eve." California Health and Human Services (CHHS) Secretary Dr. Mark Ghaly told the press conference that the rate of positive testing for COVID-19 had now soared to 34 cases per 100,000 in the state.

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Pompeo, Bahrain Foreign Minister to Discuss Defense Cooperation - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and his Bahrain counterpart Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani will host the first virtual bilateral strategic dialogue to discuss defense cooperation, US State Department said in a statement.

"The dialogue will focus on defense cooperation, regional security and prosperity, economic development and trade, people-to-people exchanges and shared human rights objectives," the statement said on Monday.

Both Pompeo and Al Zayani expected to deliver remarks during the opening session, the release added.

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Wisconsin Governor Evers Certifies Election Results, Ascertains Electors for Biden

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers said he has certified the results of the 2020 US presidential election in his state and signed a certificate for the slate of electors for Democratic nominee Joe Biden.

"Today, I carried out my duty to certify the November 3rd election, and as required by state and federal law, I've signed the Certificate of Ascertainment for the slate of electors for President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris," Evers said via Twitter on Monday evening.

According to the results, incumbent President Donald Trump lost to Biden in Wisconsin by 48.8 percent to 49.4 percent. The recount, requested by the Trump campaign in Wisconsin's two largest counties confirmed the outcome.

While major media networks have projected that Biden is the winner, Trump has said he won but victory was stolen from him via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety. Trump has sought recounts in some states and launched lawsuits to seek redress. Several states said they found no widespread evidence of election fraud and irregularities.

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Bosnia Hosts US-Adriatic Defense Talks With 6 Balkan States - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The defense ministers from half a dozen Balkan nations in the NATO alliance participated in a conference of the US-Adriatic Charter that was hosted by Bosnia-Herzegovina, the US Department of Defense announced in a readout.

"Member and observer nations of the US-Adriatic Charter, or 'A5,' conducted a meeting of Defense Ministers via video conference," the readout said on Monday.

This year's A5 Chair, Bosnia and Herzegovina, hosted the meeting with representatives from Albania, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and Slovenia in attendance, the readout also said.

Anthony Tata, performing the duties of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, represented the US Defense Department, the readout noted.

"The purpose of the session was to discuss multilateral security priorities and strengthen NATO's strategic partnerships in Southeast Europe. The leaders shared lessons learned from the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of regional cooperation to meet new, shared security challenges," the readout said.

Conference participants also discussed strengthening regional security, combatting malign influence in Southeast Europe, and NATO's "Open Door" policy, the readout added.

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US Decides to Scrap Amphibious Assault Ship After Fire in San Diego Port - Admiral

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has decided to scrap the 47,000 ton amphibious assault ship Bonhomme Richard after the spectacular five day fire that totally ravaged the vessel earlier this year, the US Naval Institute (USNI) announced.

"After thorough consideration, the secretary of the Navy and the chief of naval operations have decided to decommission the Bonhomme Richard due to the extensive damage sustained during that July fire," the announcement said on Monday.

The US Navy concluded that rebuilding the ship would take up too much industrial capabilities and cost too much, Navy Regional Maintenance Center Commander Rear Adm. Eric Ver Hage said.

The Navy decided to scrap the ship after a fire on July 12 extended for nearly five days and destroyed 60 percent of the vessel after it ended a \$250 million refit.

Ver Hage said rebuilding the amphibious assault ship would have cost the Navy from \$2.5 billion to \$3.2 billion and taken from five to seven years. The remains of the ship will now be sent to the scrapyard, he added.

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Moderna Submits Coronavirus Vaccine Data to Obtain Emergency Use Authorization

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The pharmaceutical company Moderna said that it has submitted the results of its corona vaccine trials to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in order to obtain emergency use authorization for the vaccine.

"Moderna's data for the emergency use authorization request for mRNA-1273 has been submitted to the US FDA," Moderna said via Twitter on Monday.

Moderna said that vaccine efficacy was 94.1 percent and reached 100 percent in severe COVID-19 cases. Moderna also said the vaccine is generally well tolerated and devoid of serious safety concerns.

At least three promising vaccine candidates are expected to receive emergency use authorization from US health authorities in coming weeks, according to media reports.

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Outgoing US Treasury Secretary Mnuchin Advocates 'Targeted Relief' Versus Large Stimulus

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Outgoing US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin has asked Congress to use leftover funds from an earlier COVID-19 stimulus package as "targeted relief" for the economy, instead of undertaking another major fiscal effort.

"Based on recent economic data, I continue to believe that a targeted fiscal package is the most appropriate federal response," said in remarks slated for delivery before a Senate panel he is to testify at on Tuesday. "I strongly encourage Congress to use the \$455 billion in unused funds from the CARES Act to pass an additional bill with bipartisan support."

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act was passed back in March in a bid to overcome economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The measure provided about \$3 trillion in grants and loans to US businesses and paycheck protection to qualifying citizens and permanent residents.

Democrats in Congress have been locked in a stalemate since with Senate Republicans and the Trump administration on a successive package to the CARES, arguing over the size of the next relief, as thousands of Americans, particularly those in the airlines sector, risk losing their jobs without further aid.

Mnuchin surprised markets two weeks ago by asking the Federal Reserve to return unused an used portion of \$455 billion allocated for emergency lending programs under the CARES Act that are set to expire at the end of the year. This is especially so since the central bank said in its COVID-19 lending programs were still on, a point it made again in a statement issued Monday.

Mnuchin had based his decision on Congress' original intent when it allocated the money, that whatever unused funds be returned to the issuing agency — in this case, the Treasury. He said if it ever became necessary for the Fed to tap the funds, it may request approval from the office of the Secretary of the Treasury then. Mnuchin will remain in his post until January 20, when President-Elect Joe Biden and his administration take over from the incumbent president, Donald Trump and his government.

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US House Committee Seeks Videos of Police-Protester Clash Next to White House

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The US House Natural Resources Committee is appealing to the public for video and audio recordings of a June 1 clash between demonstrators and police in a park overlooking the White House.

"The House Natural Resources Committee seeks assistance in understanding the events of June 1, 2020, when police attacked peaceful protestors at Lafayette Square in Washington, DC," the panel said in a press release on Monday.

Specifically, the committee is looking for video or still photos depicting the arrival and construction of anti-scale fencing at Lafayette Park, as well as recordings of verbal warnings from law enforcement to protesters between 6:00 p.m. EST (11:00 p.m. GMT) and 6:30 p.m. that the park was about to be cleared.

The US Park Police, the lead law enforcement agency for the iconic park, claims that June 1 culminated four days of violent protests that included bricks, rocks, caustic liquids, fireworks, and 2x4 sections of wood hurled at police officers, 50 of whom were injured.

Groups behind the protests charge that law enforcement used pepper spray, smoke canisters and rubber or plastic bullets to clear the park of peaceful protesters so that President Donald Trump and a group of aides could walk one block from the White House for a photo-op in front of a church.

A nationwide wave of protests against law enforcement followed the May 25 killing of African-American suspect George Floyd while in police custody in the city of Minneapolis.

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Wisconsin Makes Determination of Election, Allows Trump To Appeal - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The Wisconsin Election Commission (WEC) chairperson Ann Jacobs made a determination of the presidential race in the key battleground state confirming Democratic nominee Joe Biden's victory, but allowing the Republican incumbent Donald Trump to file an appeal prior to the final certification stage.

"I have examined this statement and I am now signing it as the official state determination of the results of the November 3, 2020 election and the canvass," Jacobs said Monday. "This document now has my signature on it."

WEC earlier explained that the determination allows Trump's campaign "to exercise the five-day recount appeal rights... if the campaign believes the determination inaccurately reflects the election outcome."

The determination can be modified if ordered by a court upon appeal.

Trump narrowly lost Wisconsin with its 10 Electoral College votes to Biden. The recount, requested by the Trump campaign in two of the state's largest counties of Milwaukee and Dane, not only confirmed the outcome, but slightly increased the margin in favor of Biden.

"As part of today's determination, a copy of the canvass determination for president and a statement of ascertainment will be sent to the Governor's office. The Governor then decides whether to sign off on the slate of presidential electors," WEC said.

Trump continues to dispute the validity of the November 3 election and refuses to concede, though he has authorized the launch of a formal transition to Biden, who was proclaimed President-elect by major US media outlets. In addition, the results in every major battleground state legally contested by Trump have been certified by officials.

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COVID-19 Vaccine News 'Very Positive' for US Economy in Medium Term - Fed Chair Powell

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - News of COVID-19 vaccine developments are rather positive for the US economy over the medium term as success in mitigating the virus will largely determine growth, Federal Reserve Chairman Jay Powell said before a senate panel.

"Recent news on the vaccine front is very positive for the medium term," Powell said on Tuesday. "As we have emphasized throughout the pandemic, the outlook for the economy is extraordinarily uncertain and will depend, in large part, on the success of efforts to keep the virus in check."

US Health Secretary Alex Azar told a CBS interview on Monday that if all went well, Americans could get their first shots of the coronavirus vaccine before Christmas, well before any previously anticipated deadline. Azar said this after Moderna Inc became the second drug

company on Monday to apply for emergency authorization with the Food and Drug Administration to push out doses to curb the virus.

Pfizer Inc, which filed for similar FDA approval earlier this month, used United Airlines to airlifted the first mass shipment of its COVID-19 vaccines to Chicago on Friday, CNBC reported.

Powell said the spike in new COVID-19 cases since the start of the autumn season in both the United States and abroad could be challenging over the next few months.

"A full economic recovery is unlikely until people are confident that it is safe to re-engage in a broad range of activities," the Fed chairman said. "For now, significant challenges and uncertainties remain, including timing, production and distribution, and efficacy across different groups. It remains difficult to assess the timing and scope of the economic implications of these developments with any degree of confidence."

Despite the progress in vaccines, health experts warn that the US hospital system could still be overwhelmed in the coming months by COVID-19 cases, as evidenced in the March-April period.

More than 13.3 million Americans have been infected with the coronavirus since January and more than 266,000 have died of related complications, data tracked by the Johns Hopkins University showed. In recent weeks, daily hospitalization of those infected have reached more than 100,000.

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Pompeo Conveys US Transatlantic Commitment to NATO Chief Ahead of Ministerial - State Dept

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo reaffirmed to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg of Washington's support for Transatlantic unity ahead of this week's meeting of the alliance's top diplomats, State Department spokesperson Cale Brown said in a readout.

"Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo spoke today with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to emphasize the importance of unity and a common approach to security within the NATO Alliance ahead of the December 1-2 Foreign Ministerial," Brown said Monday. "Secretary Pompeo also conveyed the United States' steadfast support for Transatlantic unity and NATO's efforts."

Earlier, Stoltenberg told reporters that NATO is facing a difficult dilemma regarding its presence in Afghanistan given that each of the options - continued engagement or withdrawal - would exact a price.

The US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison earlier accused the Taliban of not living up to the withdrawal agreement the insurgent group and the United States struck in February.

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Minnesota Authorizes Disputed Oil Pipeline Replacement Project - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Regulators from the US state of Minnesota have given a Canadian energy giant the go-ahead to proceed with a pipeline replacement project, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) said in a statement.

"On November 30, 2020, the MPCA approved the Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) and issued coverage under the Construction Stormwater General Permit for the Line 3 replacement project," the statement said on Monday.

The application by Canadian energy giant was submitted on October 19 and was given approval by the US Army Corps of Engineers on November 23, the statement said.

The pipeline has been opposed by local indigenous communities, who, in addition environmental concerns, cite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic as a threat to their communities.

The White Earth Reservation spokesperson Gary Padrta told Sputnik that his group, who have been among those vehemently opposing the pipeline, are looking into the details of the approval.

The section of pipeline in questions is part of a cross-continental pipeline system that is a critical part of the Canadian energy industry, as it carries oil from Western Canada to refineries in Ontario and the United States.

Two weeks earlier, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced that her government is moving forward with a plan to shut down Enbridge's Line 5 pipelines through the Straits of Mackinac, citing the threat of oil spills that may devastate the environment and economy.

Despite outlining an ambitious climate change agenda, the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has largely backed Canadian energy projects with Natural Resources Minister Seamus O'Regan's Press-Secretary Ian Cameron telling Sputnik that Ottawa supports Enbridge's Line 5 and Trudeau himself, reportedly, lobbying projected President-elect Joe Biden to continue with the Keystone XL pipeline expansion.

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US Border Police Prepare for Battle Against Coronavirus Vaccine Fraud - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Plans by criminal networks to exploit the introduction of coronavirus vaccines and treatments with counterfeits prompted US authorities to expand enforcement efforts to keep supplies safe, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency said in a press release.

"Based on current trends and through actionable intelligence, special agents anticipate that criminal organizations will continue to adapt and capitalize on public demand for access to vaccines and treatments as they are developed and approved. With that, the agency expects a surge in illicit attempts to introduce counterfeit versions of approved vaccines into U.S. and global marketplaces," the release said on Monday.

At least three promising vaccine candidates are expected to receive emergency use authorization from US health authorities in coming weeks and months.

While previous enforcement efforts focused largely on weeding out bogus cures, vaccines will require a secure supply chains requiring technology and a special care to ensure effectiveness when they reach the patient, the release said.

The release also warned consumers not to accept vaccines or therapeutics from unapproved sources.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) -

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russia hopes that the next US administration will give a meaningful response to Moscow's proposals in the field of cybersecurity, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Monday.

* Russia is calling on the United States and its allies to join the moratorium on the deployment of intermediate- and shorter-range missiles proposed earlier by Moscow, Ryabkov said.

* US thinking in the field of nuclear weapons has moved back some 50 years ago, when nuclear weapons use was an acceptable option, and this is a matter of serious concern, Ryabkov said.

US POST-ELECTION DEVELOPMENTS

* The US state of Arizona certified on Monday the results of the 2020 presidential election according to which Democratic nominee Joe Biden will receive the state's 11 electoral votes.

* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov commented on reported plans of presumed US President-elect Joe Biden to appoint Jen Psaki as the White House press secretary, noting that the person in this office does not shape the foreign policy and that this is a US domestic affair anyway.

OPEC MEETING

* A consensus to extend the oil output cuts by another three months is forming within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), a source in one of the delegations told Sputnik on Monday.

* OPEC may make its decision on the next year's parameters of the oil output cuts on December 1 with other OPEC+ parties, the source said.

* OPEC confirmed that its member states would reconvene on Tuesday in order to continue discussing the future volumes of the oil cuts amid market uncertainty and reported disagreements within the OPEC+ alliance.

SITUATION IN NAGORNO-KARABAKH

* Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan discussed over the phone Russia's involvement in the rebuilding effort in Nagorno-Karabakh after the recent conflict there, the Russian cabinet said Monday.

* The Armenian prosecutor's office said it had opened a criminal case under article "terrorism sponsoring" after accusing Turkey of transferring terrorist organizations to Azerbaijan to take part in hostilities during the conflict in Karabakh.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* US citizens could get their first coronavirus vaccine shots before the December 25 Christmas holiday, with Moderna becoming the second drug company after Pfizer to apply for emergency authorization to administer it, Health Secretary Alex Azar told CBS on Monday.

* The Moderna coronavirus vaccine is 94.1 percent effective, according to primary efficacy analysis of the phase 3 study, the biotechnology company announced.

* Palestine is discussing with Russia potentially using the Sputnik V vaccine, Palestinian Ambassador to Moscow Abdel Hafiz Nofal said.

RUSSIA-MOLDOVA RELATIONS

* Moldova's President-elect Maia Sandu said on Monday that the Russian task force guarding warehouses with weapons in Transnistria should be withdrawn from there, as well as those weapons.

* Sandu suggested deploying a civilian observer mission, working under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), in Transnistria instead of peacekeepers.

* Moldova has not discussed the potential withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Transnistria with Moscow in advance, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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US Senator Grassley Recovers From COVID-19, Seeks Bipartisan Virus Relief Funding

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US Senator Chuck Grassley returned to Washington on Monday after an asymptomatic bout with COVID-19 and called for Democrats and Republicans to provide additional virus-related aid to families, businesses and communities.

"Promising vaccine news means there is light at the end of the tunnel. That makes staying vigilant in the coming months all the more important. Congress must do its part and pass long overdue relief legislation to help families, businesses and communities get through this crisis. I hope my colleagues reach the same conclusion and a bipartisan bill can pass very soon,"

Grassley said in a statement.

At age 87, Grassley is the oldest Republican in the Senate with the title of president pro tempore, making him third in line for the presidency behind the vice president and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Grassley announced his positive COVID-19 test on November 17 and reported on Monday that he had passed through the 14-day quarantine with no symptoms and was cleared by his doctor to return to Washington.

While isolating at his home in the state of Iowa, Grassley lost a 27-year-streak of perfect attendance for every vote on the Senate floor.

Grassley is at least the 33rd member of US Congress - including the eighth senator - to test positive for COVID-19, according to GovTrack.us. More than 70 percent of COVID-19 cases in Congress - including all eight senators - are members of the Republican Party, which has taken a less stringent approach to the pandemic as opposed to their Democratic counterparts.

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US Welcomes Latvia's Actions Against Hezbollah - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The United States applauds recent steps taken by Latvia to constrain the Hezbollah movement, State Department spokesperson Cale Brown said on Monday.

"The United States welcomes the Latvian government's recent announcement that it considers Hizballah in its entirety as a terrorist organization," Brown said in a statement. "Latvia supports US implementation of sanctions related to Hizballah and has expressed a readiness to place national travel bans on individuals associated with Hizballah."

These types of actions, Brown added, send a strong message to the group's supporters in Iran. "On this new day, Hizballah operatives will no longer be able to operate from European soil, and the European Union will follow the lead of a number of European governments by closing the loopholes opened up by the false distinction between Hizballah's so-called military and political wings," he said.

Hezbollah was established in the 1980s as a paramilitary and political organization originating in Lebanon's Shiite population. The group initially aimed to end Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon. Hezbollah's military wing is also active in Syria, where it is fighting on behalf of the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

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US Federal Communications Commission Chairman Pai Announces Resignation - Statement

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Federal Communications Commission (FCC) head Ajit Pai said in a statement that he has handed in his resignation and will step down on January 21, according to a statement issued on Monday.

"It has been the honor of a lifetime to serve at the Federal Communications Commission, including as Chairman of the FCC over the past four years," Pai said. "I am grateful to President Trump for giving me the opportunity to lead the agency in 2017 [and] to President [Barack] Obama for appointing me as a Commissioner in 2012."

Pai, the first Asian-American ever appointed to head a US federal agency, carried out Trump's ambitious policy of deregulating many federal communications activities.

He scrapped net neutrality rules in 2017, freeing major Internet service providers to favor some forms of Internet activities and communications over others.

Pai also scrapped and relaxed previous federal regulations to accelerate the development of nationwide 5G communications systems. He also worked to free up spectrum for cell phone companies for much stronger regulatory oversight on Chinese communications companies, claiming that they were threats to US national security.

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Threat to Destroy US Federal Reserve Earns 2-Year Jail Term for Texas Man - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - A US court sentenced a 19-year-old man with a cache of bomb making chemicals and instructions to 24 months in prison based on Twitter messages threatening to blow up the Federal Reserve, the Justice Department said in a press release on Monday.

"Joel Hayden Schrimsher pleaded guilty Aug. 24 to conveying false or misleading information through the internet concerning the potential destruction of a federal building," the release said.

"Today, US District Judge Fernando Rodriguez handed Schrimsher a 24-month sentence to be immediately followed by two years of supervised release.

In June 2019, authorities identified Schrimsher as the source of a Twitter message using a pseudonym saying, "I'm gonna mail a bomb to the Federal Reserve," the release said.

When executing a subsequent search warrant, police found bomb making instructions and precursor chemicals in Schrimsher's room, the release added.

Law enforcement in the Texas cities of Harlingen and Brownsville conducted the investigation along with the FBI and US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, according to the release.

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Arizona Certifies Biden's Election Victory

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The US state of Arizona certified on Monday Democratic nominee Joe Biden's win in the 2020 US presidential election and awarded him its 11 electoral votes.

"These signed and sealed documents now constitute the official canvass results of the November 3, 2020 general election," Secretary of State Katie Hobbs said.

She signed papers together with Governor Doug Ducey, Attorney General Mark Brnovich and state Supreme Court Chief Justice Robert Brutinel.

Hobbs praised the elections in Arizona as "easily the smoothest and... most secure" in the state's history and dismissed all claims to the contrary as "unfounded."

"We do elections well here in Arizona," Ducey said.

US President Donald Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani is holding public hearings in Arizona on Monday, alleging numerous electoral irregularities and urging state lawmakers to step in and overrule the certification. The Republican incumbent continues to dispute the validity of the election and refuses to concede, though he authorized to initiate a formal transition to his Democratic rival.

Every US media outlet projected Biden the winner of the November 3 US presidential election no later than four days after it was held. Although Trump has refused to concede, he has agreed to allow the transition process to begin. Trump's only long-shot hope was to block vote certification and have courts overturn the outcome in a handful of battleground states. However, officials have now confirmed the vote in four of the largest battleground states the Trump campaign contested, thereby making it mathematically impossible to reverse the outcome of the election.

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Russia to Award Ex-Governor Brown for Supporting Bilateral Relations, Fort Ross - Envoy

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The Russian government will award former California Governor Jerry Brown for his efforts to support the Fort Ross complex as well as good relations with Russia, the Russian ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Monday. "Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov has taken a decision to award to you, Mr. Governor, the 'Medal for Assistance in Strengthening Peace,'" Antonov said at the virtual Opening Session of the Fort Ross dialogue forum.

Antonov acknowledged Brown's efforts to support the Fort Ross dialogue forum and normalize relations between Russia and the United States while expressing regrets that he can not present the medal personally due to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

"Today, we will send the award to your address," Antonov said.

The Fort Ross dialogue is a forum that has been held since 2012. The Fort Ross complex, located some 90 miles north of San Francisco, was built by Russian pioneers in the 19th century and is part of a state park that is registered as a US national historical landmark.

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Pompeo, Uzbekistan's Kalimov Discuss Opportunities for American Investors - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov discussed opportunities for American investors in Uzbekistan's markets, State Department spokesperson Cale Brown said on Monday.

"The Secretary and the Foreign Minister also discussed opportunities for US exporters and investors as Uzbekistan pursues market-oriented policies and privatization," Brown said in a statement.

The two leaders also addressed the progress of human rights reforms and enhancing security and economic cooperation.

Ties between the two countries tightened after Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev flew to the US in 2018 to meet with his US counterpart, Donald Trump. At the following round of bilateral consultations in 2019, US and Uzbek diplomats praised a strong momentum in the US-Uzbek relationship and a new level of strategic partnership.

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United Airlines Prepares First Mass Air Shipment of Pfizer Coronavirus Vaccines - Reports

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - United Airlines has airlifted the first mass shipment of Pfizer coronavirus vaccines to Chicago as the drug manufacturer awaits emergency use approval from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), CNBC reported on Monday.

"First 'mass air shipment' of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine arrives as airlines prepare for more," the report said. "United's first flight carrying Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccines arrived in Chicago on Friday."

Earlier on Monday, Health Secretary Alex Azar said Americans could get their first shots of the coronavirus vaccine before Christmas. Azar noted that Moderna had become the second pharmaceutical company to apply for emergency authorization for the vaccine with the FDA. Pfizer filed for similar approval earlier this month.

Pfizer and its partner BioNTech said earlier this month that the vaccine was 95 percent effective in a trial, while the company Moderna reported its vaccine is more than 90 percent effective. The US authorities have reported that more than 13 million Americans have tested positive for the novel coronavirus since January and more than 266,000 have died of virus-related complications, according to data tracked by Johns Hopkins University.

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Arizona Certifies Biden's Election Victory

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The US state of Arizona certified on Monday Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden's win in the 2020 US presidential election and awarded him its 11 electoral votes.

"These signed and sealed documents now constitute the official canvass results of the November 3, 2020 general election," Secretary of State Katie Hobbs said.

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Trump's Lawyer Urges Arizona Lawmakers to Block Biden's Win Certification

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani urged on Monday Arizona lawmakers to step in and not let the key battleground state certify the electoral victory of the Democratic nominee Joe Biden.

Giuliani is presenting his case at informal public hearings held by local Republicans who wished to see evidence of irregularities, dismissed by Trump's opponents and courts alike.

"Based on evidence, not political bias, not fear of the media, based on evidence you can make the determination what is the right count, or how can we get as close to the right count as possible. If we can then have the courage to select that person to get the electors... in history, I swear to God, you will be heroes," Giuliani said. "If you can't... make a determination, than don't certify. That has happened before. If they have screwed this up so badly that you really can't make a determination, than answer is you don't certify."

Arizona is expected as early as Monday to certify Biden's win and award him 11 electoral votes.

Giuliani claimed that the state, which played a key role in Democrats' overall victory, was part of an alleged nationwide fraudulent mail-in voting scheme.

"The chief fraud is the mail-in ballot. That was the back-up in case they fell too far behind. You were part of this fraud," he said. "You also had numerous situations of your workers, your citizens observing the poll officials helping people vote to the point of telling whom to vote for. Clear fraud. You had situations of poll workers being observed changing votes, taking ambiguous votes and making sure they were cast for Biden, and you have situations of stuffing the ballot box."

The lawyer, who brought several witnesses with him, repeated his routine attacks on Dominion voting machines seen by Trump supporters as the major part of their rivals' plot. The manufacturer has repeatedly denied all complaints, including of financial ties with Venezuela's leadership, as "baseless, senseless, physically impossible, and unsupported by any evidence whatsoever."

For Giuliani, it is the second round of public hearings with the first one held last week in Pennsylvania.

Every US media outlet projected Biden the winner of the November 3 US presidential election no later than four days after it was held. Although Trump has refused to concede, he has agreed to allow the transition process to begin. The incoming Biden administration has already announced key cabinet members and other officials including in the State Department, Pentagon, and Treasury.

Moreover, all of the decisive battleground states Trump has contested, Biden has now been officially certified as the winner by state officials including after a recount in Georgia, all of which courts have thus far upheld. Hence, the steps that remain before Biden occupies the White House on January 20 - the meeting of electors and confirmation by Congress - are seen by many as mere formalities.

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US Extradites Co-Founder of Cryptocurrency Ponzi Scam From Panama - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - A dual US-Brazilian national faces charges of fraud and money laundering using cryptocurrencies following his extradition from Panama, the Justice Department said in a press release on Monday.

"Dos Santos played a key role in an international investment scam that promised extraordinary rates of return on phantom investments in cryptocurrencies, defrauding victims of tens of millions of dollars," Acting US Attorney Audrey Strauss said in the release.

Dos Santos, who was extradited to the United States on November 25, is charged along with five co-defendants with defrauding individuals through investments in AirBit Club, "a purported cryptocurrency mining and trading company," the release said.

Beginning in 2015, Dos Santos and his co-defendants - Pablo Rodriguez, Scott Hughes, Cecilia Millan, Karina Chairez and Jackie Aguilar - traveled throughout the United States, and around the world to places in Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe, where they hosted lavish expos

and small community presentations aimed at convincing victims to purchase AirBit Club memberships, the release added.

As early as 2016, victims who attempted to withdraw money from the AirBit Club Online Portal and complained were met with excuses, delays, and hidden fees amounting to more than 50 percent. However, the defendants were able to siphon at least \$20 million in proceeds from customer accounts, according to the release.

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Pompeo Urges Ethiopian Prime Minister to Stop Operations in Tigray Region - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to end the military operations in the Tigray region and open up constructive dialogue with the rebels there, Department of State Principal Deputy spokesperson Cale Brown said on Monday.

"Secretary of State Michael Pompeo spoke with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed today regarding the conflict in Tigray," Brown said in a readout of the conversation. "Secretary Pompeo ... called for a complete end to the fighting and constructive dialogue to resolve the crisis."

Brown said that Pompeo noted that the Ethiopian government announcement on Saturday about the end of major military operations and emphasized the willingness of the United States, African Union and other international partners to assist in dialogue and reconciliation.

"The Secretary underscored the importance of protecting civilians from further harm, including refugees and civilians fleeing the conflict into Sudan, and allowing international humanitarian organizations access to the Tigray region to ensure the unhindered flow of humanitarian assistance to those in need," the readout said.

Pompeo urged the Ethiopian government to ensure respect for human rights of the residents of Tigray and highlighted the United States' continued strong partnership with Ethiopia and support for the country's reform agenda, the readout added.

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Anti-IS Coalition Deputy Commander Says Fractioned Terror Group 'Down But Not Out'

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) has been significantly weakened but remains a threat, Operation Inherent Resolve Deputy Commander, Maj. Gen. Kevin Copsey, said on Monday.

"[The Islamic State] is down but not out," Copsey said during a virtual discussion. "We've dismantled the physical caliphate but there are areas... geographically and conceptually where they can still operate. But they do not operate in a joined-up, well-led fashion."

The Islamic State now operates as a criminal enterprise - engaging in theft, extortion and kidnapping - beyond the US-led coalition's area of control, as the terror group looks to stave off extinction, the British Army general said.

The general added that while the prospect of a resurgent Islamic State reclaiming territory is always a concern, detention camps are secure and monitored on an ongoing basis.

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IMF Urges Euro Zone Governments to Continue Fiscal Support Amid Pandemic - Georgieva

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is calling on governments in the euro zone to continue providing fiscal support until the COVID-19 crisis is over, Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva told reporters on Monday.

"We are urging governments not to withdraw fiscal support prematurely," Georgieva said during the press briefing. "Supportive measures should be maintained until we see the recovery well underway."

Georgieva also said countries should prepare more targeted help if these measures failed.

The IMF in its euro area report earlier on Monday said withdrawing fiscal support too soon, amid the second wave of COVID-19, could derail the recovery.

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NATO Foreign Ministers to Discuss Russian Activities in Nagorno-Karabakh - US Envoy

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The foreign ministers of the NATO member states will discuss at the upcoming ministerial meeting this week Russia's activities in Nagorno-Karabakh, US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison said on Monday.

"We are seeing Russia pop up in more and more places and certainly not in a friendly environment," Hutchinson said. "But we are looking at Nagorno-Karabakh where Russia is now inserting itself."

Hutchison also said Russia is supporting in Belarus an election that clearly was not a free and fair election and is threatening people who are protesting peacefully while propping up a self-described elected leader who is not so.

In addition, Hutchinson continued to say that NATO is also looking as to what Russia is doing in Syria and in Libya.

"We see vestiges of Russian malign influence throughout the area that all of us are concerned about and we will be talking about that tomorrow most certainly, recognizing what Russia is

doing and making sure that our deterrence and defense is matching what we need to assure that Russia does not encroach on any of our allies or any of our partners," she said.

Russia has repeatedly said that it conducts a peaceful foreign policy in line with international law and has rejected allegations of "malign influence."

Earlier in November, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev signed a joint agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh. The ceasefire agreement paved the way for the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the region.

The NATO ministerial meeting is scheduled for December 1-2.

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Georgia to Certify Final Vote Recount After Completion Midnight Wednesday - Officials

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The US State of Georgia will complete a final recount of presidential ballots by midnight on Wednesday, which the state plans to certify, election officials told a news briefing on Monday.

"The recount is going on schedule to be completed by our assigned Wednesday date at the midnight deadline," Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said.

"This recount result will be the certified result," Raffensperger's deputy, Voting Systems Manager Gabriel Sterling, added.

An earlier recount reduced President-elect Joe Biden's lead over President Donald Trump by more than 1,000 votes, leaving Biden with a margin of more than 12,000 ballots, according to state election officials.

Trump continues to claim he won the presidential election and victory was stolen from him via massive election and voter fraud cost and acts of impropriety. Some states have said they did not find substantial and widespread evidence of election fraud and irregularities.

Trump called the recounts in Georgia meaningless because Raffensperger prevented looking at signatures on ballot envelopes for verification and thus prevented identifying what he said were tents of thousands of fraudulent and illegal votes.

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US Envoy to NATO Accuses Taliban of Failing to Abide by Withdrawal Agreement

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The United States believes the Taliban is violating promises made in the withdrawal agreement it reached with Washington and wants to see an immediate halt to the violence, US Permanent Representative to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison said on Monday.

"We do not think the Taliban is keeping its word under the agreement," the envoy said. "The violence is too high and the Afghan people and the Afghan soldiers have paid a heavy price. So, we are really encouraging and asking the Taliban - if they are serious about wanting to have a peaceful Afghanistan- that they will keep their word and stop the violence, [and] have a ceasefire."

The United States plans to have troop levels down to 2,500 by mid-January as a result of the deal it reached with the Taliban in February. The US began the year with about 10,000 troops stationed inside the country.

The US, she added, said the only hope the country has to ending the violence is to engage in negotiations.

Earlier, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani rejected as "unwarranted and baseless" claims in a New York Times article about him putting the brakes on the intra-Afghan peace process.

The intra-Afghan talks began in September after the Taliban reached a peace agreement with the United States in February. The United States agreed to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan within 14 months, as one of the terms of the deal, provided the Taliban stop using Afghan territory for attacks on the United States, its interests and allies.

After reaching the agreement with the Taliban, the US reduced troop levels from 10,000 to 8,600 by July, before drawing down to 5,000 by November in a second phase.

Hutchinson spoke ahead of the meeting of NATO ministers of foreign affairs planned for December 1-2.

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US State of Georgia Opens Fraud Probe of Groups Registering Out of State Voters

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The Georgia authorities have opened a criminal investigation of at least four third party groups that are allegedly registering people from other US states to vote in the upcoming Senate run-off election, Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said in a news briefing on Monday.

"I am announcing and investigation into third party groups working to register to people in other states to vote here in Georgia," Raffensperger said.

The January 5 runoff races for two open Senate seats in the state will determine whether Democrats or Republicans gain control of the chamber. Democrats could flip the Senate by winning both seats, thereby achieving a 50-50 seat tie, with presumed Vice President-elect Kamala Harris holding the tie-breaking vote.

Raffensperger named four organizations under investigation: America Votes, Vote Forward, the New Georgia Project and Operation New Voter Registration Georgia.

America Votes mailed absentee ballot applications to people at addresses where they have not lived since 1994, while Vote Forward attempted to register a dead woman from the neighboring state of Alabama to vote in Georgia, Raffensperger said.

The New Georgia Project sent voter registration applications to New York City, while the fourth named group, Operation New Voter Registration Georgia urged college students registered to

vote in other states to change their residency to Georgia for the election and then change it back after voting, he said.

"This is the kind of specific charge that our office can investigate and ascertain the truth," Raffensperger said.

Investigations would also continue into allegations regarding the presidential election, including dead, double voters, non-resident voters and ballot submissions on behalf of dead voters - all criminal offenses, Raffensperger added.

An earlier recount in Georgia showed Democratic nominee Joe Biden beating President Donald Trump by more than 12,000 votes. An additional recount of paper ballots is due to be completed later this week.

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US Hopes Turkey to Turn Back Decision on S-400, Not Make Systems Operational - NATO Envoy

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The United States expects Turkey will realize the consequences of the decision to make the Russian-made S-400 air and missile defense system operational and will reverse its plans, US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison said on Monday.

"We have registered that with Turkey time and again and we hope that before Turkey turns on that missile defense system that they will understand the consequences and how much it will hurt their alliance and their operability with the rest of us," Hutchison said. "So, I hope that Turkey is thinking about that and I hope that they will turn back the decision that they made in error to put a Russian missile defense system into Ankara."

Hutchison said the idea of putting a Russian-made air and missile defense system in the middle of NATO is "out of balance."

In addition, Hutchison said Turkey has been a great long-time ally for NATO but some of the behavior is problematic to the unity of the alliance.

"Most certainly many of us are trying to work with Turkey in a way that would cement our alliance's unity and we are asking Turkey to once again be the great ally that they have been in the past," she said.

On October, the Turkish Defense Ministry said that Turkey expects NATO to offer alternatives to the S-400 air and missile defense systems instead of criticism in connection with the purchase of the system from Russia.

Defense Minister Hulusi Akar then confirmed that Turkey had conducted tests of the S-400 systems, adding that this was scheduled within the contract.

The US Defense Department has condemned the tests and threatened Turkey with "consequences," but Turkey has repeatedly vowed to activate the missile systems despite the US threats.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeatedly said that Ankara was ready to buy US Patriot systems under the condition of technology transfer to Turkey, but adding that the issue of abandoning the S-400 systems was out of the question.

Hutchinson spoke ahead of the meeting of NATO ministers of foreign affairs planned for December 1-2.

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US Designates Chinese Company in New Venezuela-Related Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The United States designated China National Electronic Import-Export Company (CEIEC) for aiding the Venezuelan government in restricting internet access and conducting surveillance, the Treasury Department said in a notice on Monday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated CEIEC for supporting... efforts to undermine democracy in Venezuela, including its efforts to restrict internet service and conduct digital surveillance and cyber operations against political opponents," the release said.

The US will block all transactions with CEIEC or any entity which owns a 50 percent or more stake in the company, according to the release. The US will also issue a general license that gives entities 45 days to wind-down transactions with CEIEC.

The Chinese technology company has been supporting the Venezuelan government's cyber efforts since 2017, the release said. The Treasury Department said China itself uses similar technology, dubbed the "Great Firewall," to prevent dissemination of political information.

CEIEC provides cyber support to the state-run telecommunications provider Venezuelan National Telephone Company (CANTV), which controls 70 percent of internet service in the country, the Treasury Department added.

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Biden Has Options to Decide on Troops Level Reduction in Germany - Hutchinson

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The administration of presumed President-elect Joe Biden has several options to decide whether it is in the best interests of the United States to reduce the number of US troops in Germany, US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison said on Monday.

"Most certainly, options are left open for the incoming administration in January," Hutchison said. "I think that the way this has been put forward does leave the decisions for the next

administration to determine what is in their best interest and in the interests of the United States, of course."

Hutchison said she believe it is important that the incoming administration has the ability to look at the plans that have been made with regard to troop levels in Germany and overall in Europe. "I want say that the announcement about troops in Germany was also an announcement that all the troops that were there before would be in Europe," Hutchison said. "It's just whether or not they stay in Germany or whether they are moved to other places in certain instances. So, it has been forward but it certainly will be open for another administration to look at where it is at the time that they take over."

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said earlier in November that Berlin expects to expeditiously discuss the plans to withdraw a number of US troops from Germany with what is projected to be the new US president and his administration. Maas noted that the plans by the Trump administration to withdraw part of the US military contingent from Germany "will take time."

In July, then-US Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced the United States planned to withdraw 12,000 troops from Germany. Most of those troops or 6,400 people were planned to return to the United States. The move would reduce the number of US troops stationed in Germany to 24,000.

Hutchinson spoke ahead of the meeting of NATO ministers of foreign affairs planned for December 1-2.

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Pompeo to Discuss Transatlantic Security at NATO Ministerial December 1-2 - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will address issues related to Transatlantic security during a virtual meeting of the foreign ministers of NATO member states on Tuesday and Wednesday, US State Department spokesperson Cale Brown said.

"The Secretary will join allied foreign ministers to discuss the challenges to Transatlantic security, including an evolving threat environment," Brown said on Monday.

Brown pointed out that Pompeo will reaffirm during the meeting with his counterparts the United States' commitment to NATO.

"The Secretary and his counterparts from NATO and partner countries will highlight the alliance's successes and discuss current issues, including increasing our joint security capabilities and reaffirming the centrality of our Transatlantic values through the Forward-Looking Reflection Process for NATO 2030, strengthening the NATO mission in Iraq, and bolstering our capabilities to meet future challenges such as cyber defense and global pandemics," Brown added.

On Monday, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg briefed the media ahead of the NATO ministerial meeting. Stoltenberg said that NATO is facing a difficult dilemma regarding its

presence in Afghanistan given that each of the options - continued engagement or withdrawal - would exact a price.

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US, Australia Launch New Effort to Develop 'Air Breathing' Hypersonics - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The US and Australian defense establishments have initiated a new technological partnership to accelerate the development of jet-powered, or "air-breathing" hypersonic vehicles, the Department of Defense announced in a press release on Monday.

"Today, the US Department of Defense and the Australian Department of Defense announced a bilateral effort to advance the development of air-breathing hypersonic technologies," the release said.

The new initiative is called the Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment (SCiFiRE) and it is an Allied Prototyping Initiative (API) under the Directorate for Advanced Capabilities within the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering, the release also said.

The SCiFiRE effort aims to cooperatively advance air-breathing hypersonic technologies into full-size prototypes that are affordable and provide a flexible, long range capability, culminating in flight demonstrations in operationally relevant conditions," the Defense Department added. The effort will leverage previous US and Australian joint hypersonic activities over the last 15 years in the Hypersonic International Flight Research Experimentation (HIFiRE) program and research efforts involving the US Air Force, US Navy, the Royal Australian Air Force and the Australian Defense Science and Technology Group, according to the release.

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Biden's First European Trip Likely to Be to NATO Headquarters - Hutchison

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The first European trip of presumed President -elect Joe Biden will likely be to the NATO Headquarters, US Permanent Representative to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchison said on Monday.

"I think that the President-elect's first trip to Europe will be to NATO because he is such a supporter of the Transatlantic bond and also because that's a tradition that American presidents have followed - that their first trip to Europe, our major alliance, will be to NATO," Hutchison said.

Hutchison also said she expects a seamless transition in support of the Transatlantic bond given that the United States is very committed to NATO and there will be no change in that

commitment given that the projected wind of the 2020 presidential election is "certainly pro-NATO."

"I served with him [Biden] in the United States Senate and I know he is very much a multilateral organization supporter," Hutchison said. "We like to have allies. He likes to have allies, and I think that is ongoing from this administration to the next administration."

Hutchinson spoke ahead of the meeting of NATO ministers of foreign affairs planned for December 1-2.

Major US media networks have projected Biden to be the winner of the November 3 presidential election. However, President Donald Trump said he won the election and victory was stolen from him via massive election and voter fraud and acts of impropriety. Some states have said they found no substantial fraud and irregularities.

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US Designates Chinese Company in New Venezuela-Related Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has designated a Chinese technology company in new sanctions targeting Venezuela, the Treasury Department said in a notice on Monday.

The new sanctions target the Beijing-based China National Electronic Import-Export Company (CEIEC), the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in the notice.

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Biden Confirms Yellen to Lead US Treasury, Names Others to Economic Team

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Presumed President-elect Joe Biden announced top officials responsible for managing the US economy during his expected upcoming administration, led by former Federal Reserve Chairwoman Janet Yellen as Treasury Secretary and a mission to deliver relief from economic fallout of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

"As we get to work to control the virus, this is the team that will deliver immediate economic relief for the American people during this economic crisis and help us build our economy back better than ever," Biden said in a press release.

If confirmed by the Senate, Yellen would be the first woman to head the Treasury Department. In addition to Yellen, Biden named Neera Tanden as director of the Office of Management and Budget; Wally Adeyemo as Deputy Treasury Secretary and Cecilia Rouse to chair the Council of Economic Advisers, with Jared Bernstein and Heather Boushey as fellow members of the Council, the release said.

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Biden Post Election 'Favorability Rating' Rises 6 Points, as Trump Approval Drops - Poll

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - More than half of US adults (55 percent) view presumed President-elect Joe Biden favorably, a six point increase from just prior to the November 3 presidential election, a Gallup poll revealed on Monday.

Over the same period, favorable views of President Donald Trump fell 3 points to 42 percent, a press release explaining the poll said.

"Biden's current rating is the highest it has been since February 2019, two months before he declared his candidacy for president, when it was 56 percent. Trump's latest favorability falls short of the highest of his presidency, 49 percent in April, during the initial stages of the coronavirus pandemic," the release said.

Biden owes his increased popularity to independents and Republicans, whose positive ratings of Biden grew from 48 percent to 55 percent and 6 percent to 12 percent, respectively.

Democrats' nearly unanimous positive ratings remained constant, the release added.

Trump's lower post-election favorable rating is owed more to Republicans, whose approval of the president fell six points to 89 percent while it stayed essentially unchanged among independents and Democrats, according to the release.

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US Screens 1.18Mln Passengers at Airports on Nov 29 Despite COVID-19 Outbreak - TSA data

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Airports in the United States screened 1.8 million passengers on Sunday as people defied health advice on the COVID-19 pandemic to visit their families over the holiday weekend, data from the Transportation Security Administration showed on Monday.

A total of 1,176,091 passengers passed through US airport clearance at the weekend, the highest number of travelers since the start of the pandemic in March, TSA data showed, although the number was less than half of the 2,882,915 screened at airports a year earlier.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had warned Americans that COVID-19 cases are spreading rapidly across the country and urged them not to travel during the Thanksgiving holiday, saying they should celebrate at home or reach out virtually to friends and family.

More than 13.3 million Americans have been infected with the coronavirus since January and more than 266,000 have died of related complications, data tracked by the Johns Hopkins University showed. In recent weeks, daily hospitalization of those infected have reached more than 100,000.

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Biden Launches Committee Tasked with Planning Inauguration - Deputy Press Secretary

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - Projected US President-elect Joe Biden has launched a committee tasked with preparing for the January 20 presidential inauguration ceremony, his transition team announced in a statement on Monday.

"Today, we are proud to announce the Presidential Inaugural Committee for the next President and Vice President of the United States, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris," the team said via Twitter. "We look forward to sharing updates here about events on January 20th as well as ways for Americans to engage with the Inauguration."

Biden's spokesman Matt Hill said the team would be led by CEO Tony Allen, Executive Director Maju Varghese, Deputy Executive Director Erin Wilson and Deputy Executive Director Yvanna Cancela.

Major US media outlets have projected Democratic nominee Biden to be the winner of the November 3 presidential election, but President Donald Trump has refused to concede, alleging that victory was stolen from him via fraud. Election officials from all 50 states and the country's top national security leaders have said that they found no evidence of substantial fraud or irregularities in the election.

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US Federal Reserve Extends Emergency Lending Programs Through March 31 - Board

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve said on Monday it has extended emergency lending programs that were set to expire at the end of this year through March 31 to provide critical short-term funds to markets still distressed by the coronavirus pandemic.

"By backstopping critical short-term funding markets, these facilities are supporting market functioning and enhancing the flow of credit to the economy," the Fed's board said in a statement. "The extension, which has also been approved by the Treasury Department, will facilitate planning by potential facility participants and provide certainty that the facilities will continue to be available through the first quarter of 2021 to help the economy recover from the COVID-19 pandemic."

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US Could See 2 COVID-19 Vaccines Available by Next Month - Health Secretary

WASHINGTON, November 30 (Sputnik) - US citizens could get their first shots of the COVID-19 vaccine before the December 25 Christmas holiday, with Moderna Inc becoming the second drug company after Pfizer Inc to apply for emergency authorization to administer doses, Health Secretary Alex Azar told CBS in an interview on Monday.

"If everything is on track, if everything proves what it appears to be, we could get approval within days after that," Azar said. "We'll ship within 24 hours of FDA authorization. We could see both of these vaccines out and into people's arms before Christmas."

Moderna earlier on Monday said it would request an emergency use authorization from the US Food and Drug Administration and a conditional approval from the European Medicines Agency, after finding that its coronavirus vaccine is 94.1 percent effective.